Cancer Research
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In Review

A particularly pessimistic view of the nation's 10-year "War on Cancer" was presented by the ABC news show, "20/20," in an October special.

The national commitment to conquer cancer was supposed to use the same kind of wizardry that split the atom and sent men to the moon, said show host Hugh Downs.

The TV program opened with an American Cancer Society official, Dr. Frank Rauscher, declaring, "We're winning this war. Cancer today is now known as a curable disease."

But the entire one-hour show questioned that judgment. Said reporter Geraldo Rivera, "In the words of one government critic, the war on cancer has become a medical Vietnam."

A basic theme of the ABC program was that the $10 billion in tax money spent in this war had done little good—serving mainly as a grand public relations gesture—partially because "worthy researchers with innovative treatments are harassed, stifled, discouraged."

"Despite sophisticated new technology and despite the expenditure of billions of tax dollars, the odds today [of survival] are the same one-in-three odds that faced the cancer patient back in May of 1958," Rivera claimed.

Dr. Samuel Epstein, described as a world-renowned expert on the politics behind cancer research, told ABC that Congress was "basically conned by the cancer establishment into giving it a massive infusion of funds because they were told, 'Gentlemen, give us money and we'll cure cancer,' like a moonshot program. In fact, this was a boondoggle."

The show's second major theme was that too close connections between the Cancer Society, the nation's wealthiest private charity, and the government's National Cancer Institute, stultifies cancer research. There is an overlap in "boards, committees, grants, even publications" between NCI and ACS, "20/20" charged.

Thus, it quoted critics saying "their combined functions has a stranglehold effect, creating a kind of monopoly on cancer research and information." Critics charge scientists who haven't managed the game of grantsmanship, no matter the potential of their work, don't get funded, Rivera told his nationwide audience.

A lengthy section of the show featured two "innovative mavericks," scientists with new approaches who claim they are frozen out from cancer research money.

Rivera was also critical of the media, saying they are "putty" in the hands of the cancer establishment. "When it comes to cancer, news people are as frightened as anyone else, and often we lose our critical sense," he said.

Rivera concluded that truth itself might be the first casualty of this war effort. (The show made no mention of tobacco.)

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